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Sadu Weaving: the pace of a camel in a fast-moving culture

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*The content of this paper is derived from my TSA oral presentation

Abstract

As a Fulbright Specialist in Kuwait in 2015, I was introduced to a textile known as sadu, which loosely translated means “moving at the pace of a camel.” This rich textile has been a part of the traditionally nomadic Bedouin culture of the Middle East, and is front and center in fast moving Kuwait. Hugging the shores of the Arabian Gulf, Kuwait is at the intersection of desert and gulf, a nation full of progress, forward thinking, and contemporary approaches to practically everything. On Gulf Road, right in the heart of Kuwait City sits the center of sadu weaving, Beit al Sadu, an organization focused on finding a way for this traditional woven textile to function within contemporary culture.

Throughout Kuwait and the region, sadu weaving is a symbol of both traditional and contemporary culture. Artists, designers, and now craft producers from outside are appropriating the symbols and designs into their work, whether it is for a laser cut book cover, or tile motif on the local Aquarium, or “sadu” cloth mass produced in Pakistan. The value placed on sadu is evident, but many people are not aware of the ongoing tradition of woven cloth. A goal of Al Sadu House is for the community to continue to embrace the cloth itself, while continuing to preserve the heritage and future of sadu weaving. Through examples from Kuwaiti culture, interviews with weavers and patrons, I will discuss the ways in which this textile is viewed and the work that is being done to shift the focus from these symbols, to the rich history and present making of the cloth itself. I will present the ongoing project titled *Weaving Stories*, a collaborative community based exhibition that aims to foster an understanding and appreciation of sadu and the artisans who create it.

The Pace of a Camel

Dr. Venny Nakazibwe, a professor of art at Makerere University in Uganda states “...in every place around the world there are lots of treasures that we have perhaps ignored, and there is need to revive aspects of the past in order to propel new developments into the present and in the future” (Dr. Venny Nakazibwe). I opened my previous TSA presentation on Ugandan bark cloth with this quote, and found that it was just as relevant to the topic of sadu weaving. I have spent the last year and a half working with an arts organization, Beit Al Sadu/Sadu House to develop new approaches to the sadu weavings of Kuwait (Figure 1). Through joining with a community of

scholars, researchers, and educators, we seek to revive the value of sadu's past while working to develop new approaches from the standpoint of art, design, and community.



Figure 2 Sadu cloth at the Beit Al Sadu/Sadu House, 2015
All photos in paper courtesy of Lesli Robertson.



Figure 1 Traditional Bedouin loom, photo
courtesy of Beit Al Sadu/Sadu House

The title of this presentation is *Sadu Weaving: the pace of a camel in a fast-moving culture*. This statement characterizes the unique position of this textile within Kuwait. The slow process of weaving and the value of the handmade is at odds with the consumer driven, technology-valuing culture that many of us live in today. As we know, weaving is one of the oldest forms of textiles, the earliest weavings found date back to 7000 BCE. In its simplest form, it is the joining of the warp and weft to create a cloth. This cloth was and is an important part of many cultures; created to be functional while also carrying messages of culture and society through its purpose, the colors and symbols found on the cloth, as well as the value placed on it.

Within the deserts of Kuwait, the nomadic Bedouin have been creating sadu woven cloth for centuries. The word sadu references the extension of the hand, the slow pace of a camel. It is a word used for the woven cloth and the loom it is created on (Figure 2). The original function of sadu cloth was as tents, utilitarian objects such as camel bags, pillows, tent dividers, and many other types of family furnishings woven to support the nomadic life of the Bedouin (Figure 3). This form of pastoral nomadism meant that you had to be able to transport your entire life, including your house on the back of your livestock. Each element of daily life was carefully designed to support the frequent moving of entire households; it dictated the type of weaving process, the way the loom was designed and the cloth was woven, and most importantly how it was used.



Figure 3 Examples of camel trappings and bags, Beit Al Sadu/Sadu House

This woven cloth went beyond mere function. It was highly valued and weavers were very respected, memorizing their methods of weaving in order to pass these down from generation to generation. Women were the weavers, learning from a very early age the entire process of spinning, dyeing the wool, and weaving the cloth. The tie between the raising of livestock, their environment, and weaving meant that they used the fiber from camel, goat, and sheep to create woven cloths, in addition to using plants in their environment to dye the fiber rich oranges and reds. The warp-faced plain weave cloth was woven on looms constructed on the desert floor, made to be easily set up and taken apart, so as the family moved to tend livestock, they could easily take their woven work. Despite the simplicity of the looms, powerful and meaningful

"the tent divider was the most precious and valued piece in the family possessions. It was valued as gold, and stored as we keep gold...we bring it out only on special occasions"
Quote from Umm Abdallah, Ajman tribe (Text courtesy of Sheikhha Altaf Al-Sabah)



Figure 4 Ibjad, Woven Text Divider courtesy of Beit Al Sadu/Sadu House

symbols became the focal point of these richly decorated cloths. The most elaborate woven cloths became the *ibjad*, or tent divider (Figure 4). Long lengths of the woven cloth were stitched together to reach the height of a man. The length of these cloths could reach 10 meters. Each section held geometrically based symbols, from stripes, to triangles, to diamonds. Symbolism that is even more intricate was reserved for the *sharjarah* section, which occurs in the middle horizontal band of the cloth (Figures 5, 6). The meaning of *sharjarah* is tree, this area of the cloth is designed as the cloth is woven. The design motifs in this section are inspired from the weaver's life and from her vocabulary of symbols passed down through her family or culture. These are abstracted symbols that can represent sand dunes, jewelry, livestock, belts, face decorations, and more.



Figure 5 Cloth courtesy of Beit Al Sadu/Sadu House



Figure 6 Cloth by Laila Yasser, Beit Al Sadu/Sadu House

These woven cloths are extraordinary and incredibly elaborate. Their power comes through their size, scale and the intricacy of the designs. They are truly unique and highly valuable.

Sadu Weaving and Beit Al Sadu/Al Sadu House

It is evident that the cultural and social environment of weaving has changed in Kuwait and most of the Gulf region. Al Sadu Society otherwise known as Beit Al Sadu/Al Sadu House, is a project that started in 1978 as a private initiative with the aim of preserving the traditional arts of Bedouin weaving. Through the leadership of leading sadu scholar, Sheikha Altaf Al-Ali Al-Sabah, this organization set a foundation that aims to preserve the valuable history and cloths of sadu weaving. Under Sheikha Altaf Al-Sabah's leadership, this society became forward thinking, recognizing the changing lifestyle of the Bedouin, who began slowly abandoning the nomadic lifestyle for urban living. Over the years, the project formalized and now is housed in Beit Al Marzouk, built in 1936, one of the few heritage buildings still found in Kuwait (Figure 7). This location serves as a museum and education space for the local and international community. Through continued work with Bedouin weavers, they hold regular workshops and opportunities to learn sadu weaving.



Figure 8 Beit Al Sadu/Sadu House

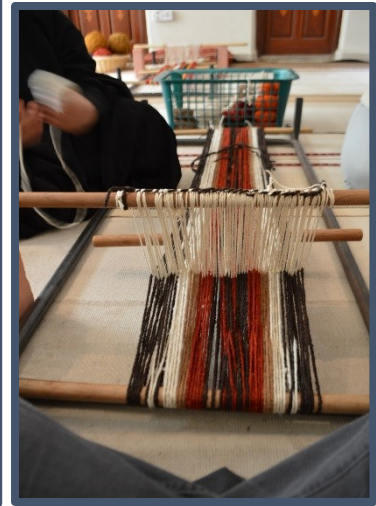


Figure 7 New stationary loom designs using steel round bars, Beit Al Sadu/Sadu House

Women today rarely weave the long cloth to create a tent or the rich ornate tent dividers of the past. However, a growing awareness of the cultural significance and the visual beauty of these traditional arts during the last forty years has helped to revive the craft and strengthen the interest in its repertoire of patterns and designs. Smaller groups of committed weavers continue this tradition using new loom designs and evolving patterns (Figure 8).

While traditional weavers continue to practice their craft, the bold colors, symbolism, and narrative quality of sadu have attracted the growing interest of many artists in Kuwait and the Gulf. In the 1980s, Beit Al Sadu started a collaboration with renowned artist Sami Mohammad to design and produce new and modern sadu patterns and weaves. It was a new step, initiated by the leadership of Beit Al Sadu, to carry sadu weaving forward as a contemporary art form. Other initiatives followed in later years, with artist Bader AlMansour and NUQAT, a cultural design initiative. In 2016, the SADI (Sadu Art and Design Initiative) project launched, engaging with diverse artists from architecture, interior design, metals, installation, and film. With each of these initiatives, artists and designers are encouraged to study and explore the Beit Al Sadu reservoir of documentation on traditional sadu weaving in order to re-think and re-interpret traditions and innovation in textile arts (Figure 9).

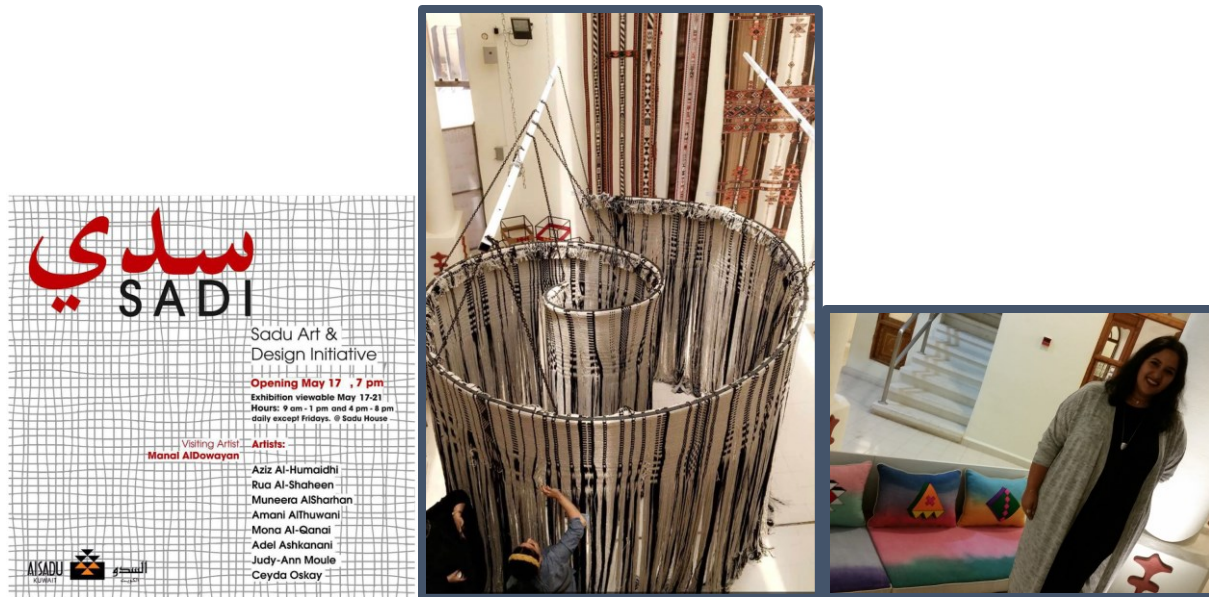


Figure 9 SADI Art & Design Initiative press and installations. Including works by Manal Al Dowayan (center) and Muneera Al Sharhan (rt)

Sadu Weaving, Community, and Collaboration

As a Fulbright Specialist to Kuwait in January of 2015, I began a relationship with Al Sadu House and its leadership under Skeikha Altaf Al-Sabah. In our discussions, I learned about the need for the sadu cloth to find new audiences within the Kuwaiti community. The ubiquitous use of sadu motifs as design elements on billboards, print for tissue boxes, laser cut book covers and more have seemed to establish a disconnect with the tradition that they are referencing (Figure 10). The distinct triangular pattern, diamond motifs, and color palette were found throughout



Figure 10 Examples of sadu motifs found throughout Kuwait

supermarkets, souqs, and high end retailers. These designs did not carry the history or tie to their rich culture and background. They became design motifs without relation to the tradition of sadu cloth.

During a yearlong development phase, the partnership between Beit Al Sadu and myself grew into a project that aims to bring a new perspective on sadu to the regional community. In November 2016, *Weaving Stories* launched at Al Shaheed Park, supported by the Kuwaiti



Figure 11 *Weaving Stories* exhibition at Al Shaheed Park, Kuwait, 2016

Ministry of Culture, Arts, and Letters (Figure 11). This weeklong interactive exhibition and outreach initiative aimed to bring the story of sadu out of the walls of Beit Al Sadu and into the community; honoring textile traditions while exploring new interpretations.



Figure 13 *Weaving Stories* exhibition



Figure 12 Collaborative woven wall inspired by Ibjad tent divider

Through the creation of two collaborative installations, artists, designers, makers, and the community explored their relationship and interest in the story of sadu cloth. The focus of the exhibition was a 12 meter long woven wall, inspired by the traditional tent dividers of the Bedouin (Figure 13). This wall was woven together with panels of small artworks created from over 30 individuals from at least 6 countries (including 10 students from UNT), most living in Kuwait. It served as a platform to highlight the diversity, of not only the community within Kuwait, but to point to the rich textile traditions that are still thriving today. In addition to this

artwork, the exhibition hosted a five meters long interactive loom, inspired by the original Bedouin ground loom. Running its length were laser cut wooden panels inspired by the weaving of Laila Yasser, one of the current Bedouin weavers still practicing. Visitors to the exhibition were asked to weave their story and leave a written response on the circular warp (Figure 14). The exhibition was accompanied by a series of outreach activities including weaving workshops for adults and children, interactive exhibition guides for participating school groups, and the development of curriculum in collaboration with the Ministry of Education to bring weaving into the local schools.

The response from the exhibition was immediate and positive. I was able to see men, women, and children discover sadu weaving in a new way. This initiative, in partnership with the overall vision of Sheikha Altaf Al-Sabah and Beit Al Sadu, is part of a larger goal, to honor the past while propelling these traditions forward. It is with hope that as the tradition of Bedouin weaving finds its footing in contemporary culture, the richness of its heritage continues to be valued by the community that surrounds it.



Figure 14 Interactive loom

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**Information was also referenced from undocumented conversations with weavers and the local community.*

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أمل الفاضل، أروى سيف الدين، أماندا باتسون، أنطونيو دا سيلفا ، أزما ناديم، حنان الكاظمي، جيداً أوسكاي ، رانجو غاندي، زهراء إبراهيمي، سعاد مراد، سوزان مناليني ، شيلي اللهو، صيتة ناصر محمد، عبد الله الحسينان، عائشة خالد، عفيفة بهيمان، غادة إبراهيم الموسى، فائزة العميري، كانوال زارين بخاري، ليلي السليمان، ليلي ياسر ، ليسلي روبرتسون، منال الميموني ، مجموعة خيط، مطيرة مسلم، نوال البكر ، ناهدة البقمي، نادية الجراح، هيفاء المغني، مارلين كمال يوسف، منيرة الحوطي، وفاء الكندري.
طلبة من برنامج الألياف من جامعة شمال تكساس

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